Wayside Exhibit Design

Introduction

Successful wayside exhibits inspire a connection between the visitor and the resource. Because they are located directly adjacent to features on the landscape, they foster an immediate and direct association of information and place. This paper addresses the philosophy of wayside exhibit design as a form of interpretive media.

Freeman Tilden defined interpretation as: "An educational activity which aims to reveal meanings and relationships through the use of original objects, by firsthand experience, and by illustrative media, rather than simply to communicate factual information." Wayside exhibits are an "illustrative media" that illuminate features on the landscape as "original objects" enjoyed "firsthand" by active visitors.

Good looks

Too often design is considered an exercise in decoration. People hire designers to make things "look good." Desktop publishing and presentation software provide all sorts of styles and templates to help us format information so it looks "professional." But design is not about adhering to a template, arranging images in a certain way, using existing or custom styles, selecting certain materials or making things look nice. Although producing a media product can and does involve all of those things, design is a process of problem-solving, planning, and developing products that serve an intended purpose.

Design?

Webster's Dictionary defines design this way:
Verb 1. To conceive in the mind, 2. To form a plan for. 3. To have as a goal or purpose, 4. To plan by making a preliminary sketch, outline, or drawing
Noun 1. A sketch or drawing, 2. A visual composition, 3. Invention and disposition of forms, parts, or details of something according to plan.
Synonyms include: blueprint, idea, layout, plan, scheme, strategy

Wayside design

Wayside design is the process of visualizing the meanings and relationships of the landscape and enhancing firsthand visitor experiences.

Start with the site

Waysides give focus to significant features on the landscape and facilitate their connection to larger meanings. They foster a direct interaction between visitors and park resources. Outdoors, the physical landscape feature within the viewing area of the visitor is the "original object" and waysides are the caption.

Understand visitor experience

Visitors are out of their cars and on the move. What is the best location to capture their attention, encourage them to pause and provide an interpretive moment? Envision yourself standing before a significant feature along a trail. Why did you stop where you did? If you have 3 seconds to grab a visitor's attention, what will spark a connection to the site? Don't expect anyone to read your carefully crafted text until they have some desire to read. There are some who will read every word you put before them, but aim for those visitors who are charging headlong through a park hoping to have a great time. Consider young children and non-English speakers. As they charge through, grab a moment of their time by grabbing their attention. Take 30 seconds to keep them engaged with a dynamic visual presentation that makes an immediate connection to the landscape. Use carefully crafted words to reveal that, yes, this is the site, the actual place, the "original object." But don't keep their attention away from the landscape too long by expecting them to read in-depth information or get the whole story because, after all, their experience should be of the park itself. Seek to interpret – spark the questions, and let them move on up the trail to further their firsthand experience.

Find a connection

Assume you are standing in some special place with a group of visitors and can have anything you want to help reveal the meaning of the site. If you are standing before FDR's library, you might want FDR with you holding his architectural drawings. On a battle site, you might want the soldiers around you, guns at the ready. In a desert landscape you might like to have all the creatures that call the place home. In front of a historic building you might like to peek inside and see the original occupants going about their business. Or perhaps you need to fly above the site to see the differences in vegetation. What will reveal the meaning of the place? Think large.

With this exercise, you have begun visualizing what you will need to develop an effective wayside exhibit. How do you convert these ideas into a visual form? Think about the graphic that will speak a thousand words. Put the soldiers back on the battlefield by developing an illustration of the site at the time of the battle. Is there a photograph of FDR in front of the library with his drawing in hand? Gather all the creatures of the desert together in a series of photographs, or perhaps develop a new illustration. Is there a photograph of the interior space of the historic building, a drawing, or portraits? Look for an aerial photo from above the site to give focus to a subtle landscape detail. As you consider graphic selection, keep the wayside purpose and context in clear focus. It is important to remember that the landscape is part of the design solution.

Sketch thumbnails

While your team (subject matter expert, writer, designer, interpreter) is on site get your ideas on paper so you can share them with others. Make a thumbnail sketch yourself, or have a designer do the drawing to help facilitate the discussion. Sketch small to encourage simplicity and focus. Have actual graphics on hand but don't be limited by them. Brainstorm ideas and draw them all. The quality of the drawing is not as important as the ability to show ideas, hierarchy of information, and graphic options.

Develop the graphic layout

Up to this point, the design process has not involved expensive or sophisticated software programs, nor the need to scan images or develop layouts. After you've sketched your wayside ideas and have agreed on what the interpretive focus will be, then you can move forward to consider panel size, reproduction methods, typography, graphic elements etc.

Look for patterns

One of the tools used by the National Park Service is an underlying grid or template for wayside exhibits. The purpose of the template is to create a consistent recognizable format for organizing and presenting information to the public. Another added benefit is that it helps to streamline the process of producing hundreds of new waysides each year. The templates along with the National Park Service identity standards, editorial standards, map standards, consistent work processes, and long-term maintenance help keep costs down and visitor confidence in the wayside media at a high level.

Understand the process

The Department of Wayside Exhibits has been refining the process of wayside exhibit development for over 30 years. Learn from their experiences. Listed below are some of the many helpful references, tools and templates:

- **Wayside Process Chart** - overview of the wayside exhibit work process
- **Wayside Grids 2001** - QuarkXpress files for wayside layout development
- **Wayside Grids Guide** white paper - how to use the grids
- **Typographic Style Guide** - directs typographic treatment and editorial style
- **Thumbnail templates** - for printing thumbnail worksheets
- **Concept Plan Template** - for review of wayside layouts and text
- **Production Notes Template** - to direct the fabrication of panels
- **Digital Naming** white paper - for consistent management of wayside media assets
- **Graphic Resource Requirements** white paper - to ensure adequate image quality
- **Comprehensive Production Package** white paper - outlines preflight requirements